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Martin Luther translating the Bible, Wartburg Castle, 1521. Eugène Siberdt 1898.

THE 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

An Opportunity for Depth

By Patrick Howell, S.J.

Christian churches are commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation triggered by Martin Luther in 1517. The Reformation transformed Christianity forever. After Luther, Christianity was no longer the same. It was fractured, for sure, but it also became more authentic to its origins, to the Scriptures, and to the historic reality of Jesus.

Considering the importance of the anniversary, it's surprising how underplayed it has been by our American Jesuit universities and colleges. The same is not true in Germany nor in the Vatican. Pope Francis signaled its importance by participating in a significant Reformation commemoration in Lund, Sweden, earlier this year. Perhaps this short piece can be a prod.

The prolific, brilliant – and often cantankerous – theologian Martin Luther is at the center of the commemoration. Luther was born in what is now Germany in 1483. At age 21, he entered the Augustinian monastery. With Bible in hand, he hoped to find answers for his guilt-ridden interior life.

Luther came to believe that people were justified, or made right, before God not through good works or the sacraments but solely through their faith and God's grace. Luther held that the Bible alone is

the ultimate spiritual authority, not the pope or the church.

The trigger for his rebellion against the Catholic Church was the disturbing report that a Dominican friar was taking large payments for granting indulgences, or releases from punishment for sins. On October 31, 1517, Luther released a list of 95 theses, arguments against what he saw as the abuses of church practice. Copies of Luther's theses and his fiery follow-up sermons were mass produced on the relatively new invention of the printing press.

The fire of reform enkindled by Luther gradually took flame until it engulfed all of Northern Europe and threatened church and state alike. The Jesuits became famous 40 years later for being the vanguard of the Catholic Reformation as a counter balance to Protestantism.

There are now nearly 45,000 Protestant denominations around the world, including mainline Protestants, Anglicans, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and more. Since the Second Vatican Council, relations between Protestants and Catholics have dramatically improved. Anathemas are no longer hurled at each other.

The anniversary is a time of remembrance, for repentance, and

an opportunity to strengthen our understanding in faith. Many Christian leaders see this anniversary as an opportunity to question their faith more deeply. What is fundamental to our faith? What do you believe? Why do you believe it? What does it mean to be a Christian? The anniversary is as much about the future as it is about the past.

Perhaps our Jesuit institutions can capitalize on this event. They could host occasions for in-depth religious dialogue and help students to understand and embrace their religious origins and the wealth of resources for peace, justice, and advancing the common good.

Patrick Howell, S.J., professor of pastoral theology at Seattle University, has been active in ecumenical relations for several decades. He's a member of "Jesuits in Ecumenism," which held its 23rd Congress in July in Nemi, Italy, and he is chair of the National Seminar, which publishes Conversations.

The substance of this article was drawn from this source:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2017/02/03/500th-anniversary-protestant-reformation/34420/>